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ABSTRACT

International Literacy Year (1990), sponsored by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), is a time of great hope and unique opportunity. It is intended to convey two essential messages: (1) education matters and will be decisive in shaping the future of individuals and societies; and (2) there is an urgent need for cooperation and solidarity among peoples and countries in order to ensure the right to education--and a future--for all people on earth. Although the year will be filled with numerous and varied events and projects, these two messages give it purpose; its success will be determined by the degree to which these messages are understood and acted upon. In the past decade, educational gains have been harder to achieve, and in some developing nations, the progress of the 1960s and 1970s is threatened. The richer nations must share more of their resources to help the poorer nations, and the developing nations must make education their greatest priority. International Literacy Year is a starting point for literacy activity, not a celebration of it. UNESCO stands ready to help in any way it can to aid all nations to develop the education of their people. (KC)

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LITERACY LESSONS

INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR

International Literacy Year: opportunity and challenge

by Federico Mayor, Director-General of Unesco

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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What lies ahead for me?

INTRODUCTION

The timing of International Literacy Year (ILY) is auspicious. As I write this, in the final days of 1989, it is evident that our world is undergoing a rapid and fundamental transformation. The East-West conflict, which has conditioned international relations for more than four decades, appears to be drawing to a close. This is a momentous development, filled with hope and promise. It is not only that the grave threat of nuclear war – indeed, of annihilation – under which we have lived for so long is receding, but also that, gradually, a culture of conflict is yielding place to a culture of peace. The logic inherent in situations of conflict is that of the zero-sum game: the advantage of one protagonist is, by definition, the disadvantage of the other. By contrast, in a culture of peace, there is a perceived mutuality of interest and a sense of common responsibility. Such

changes in mentality – in outlook and expectation – are the invisible forces which transform the practice of international relations and ultimately change the course of history. We may not, as yet, be at the point of beating swords into ploughshares, but we are moving swiftly in that promising direction. It is this profound change in the international context which gives special meaning and importance to International Literacy Year. For there is now a real hope that priorities will change, that attention, resources and vision will be focused upon meeting the urgent and basic needs of humanity. This would, indeed, be a precious 'peace

OBJECTIVES

- *Increasing action by the governments of Member States afflicted by illiteracy or functional illiteracy to eliminate these problems, particularly through education in rural areas and urban slums, in favour of women and girls and among populations and groups having special educational problems or needs;*
- *Increasing public awareness of the scope, nature and implications of illiteracy as well as of the means and conditions for combating it. In particular, an effort should be made to alert public opinion to the rate of illiteracy among adult women and its implications for the well-being of their children, the lower rate of school participation among girls than among boys and the association between illiteracy, on the one hand, and poverty, under-development and economic, social and cultural exclusion on the other;*
- *Increasing popular participation, within and among countries, in efforts to combat illiteracy, particularly through activities of governmental and non-governmental organizations, voluntary associations and community groups;*
- *Increasing co-operation and solidarity among Member States in the struggle against illiteracy;*
- *Increasing co-operation within the United Nations system and, more generally, among all intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations in the struggle against illiteracy;*
- *Using International Literacy Year for launching the Plan of Action for the eradication of illiteracy by the year 2000 and for addressing issues of critical importance to the progress of literacy such as reducing primary-school drop-out and establishing post-literacy programmes to prevent relapse into illiteracy.*

dividend'. And, of all the places we might invest it, none would yield a higher or more certain return than education. Thus, ILY is timely – it arrives at a moment of great hope and unique opportunity. If we have the courage and the vision to seize this historic opportunity, 1990 could mark the dawn of a new era as well as the beginning of a new decade.

International Literacy Year is intended to convey two essential messages.

- The first is, quite simply, that education matters – indeed, that education will be decisive in shaping our future as individuals and societies.
- The second message is that there is an urgent need for co-operation and solidarity among peoples and States in order to ensure the right to education – that is, the right to a future – for all, for every woman, man and child on earth.

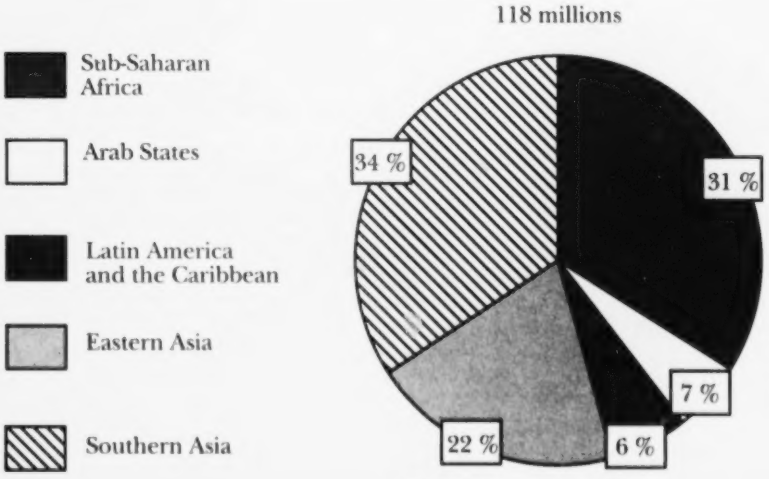
To be certain, the Year will be filled with a vast variety of events and occasions, designed to serve a set of carefully selected objectives, but it is these two messages which give purpose, meaning and unity to the activities of the Year. In the final judgement, the success of the Year will be determined by the degree to which these messages are understood and acted upon.

EDUCATION: THE FORCE OF THE FUTURE

As we enter the last decade of the century, and stand on the threshold of a new millennium, the shape of tomorrow is already visible on the horizon; indeed, in the most advanced industries – those based upon 'brain power' rather than 'brawn power' – the twenty-first century has already arrived. What characterizes and, in fact, defines the industries of the future is that the

resource which counts most is human creativity and capability. The civilizations of the past were based upon natural resources or favourable situations or locations. It was, for example, the 'gift of the Nile' which made possible the intensive mode of agricultural production upon which the civilization of the Pharaohs was based. In the nineteenth century, the presence of coal and iron ore was essential to a civilization based upon steam and steel. Today – and even more so tomorrow – progress will be based upon the products of the mind: upon research, invention, innovation and adaptation. The riches which will shape the world of tomorrow will not derive from mines, fields or factories, but from schools, universities and research centres. It will be these institutions which will refine and develop the 'raw material' of human talent – with which every society is generously endowed – into the skills, know-how and competencies that will serve to fashion the future. Hence, education is the force of the future and access to edu-

Figure 1. Projected number of out-of-school children in developing countries, both sexes, age group 6–11 years, in the year 2000



cation the *sine qua non* for effective participation in the life of the modern world. Illiteracy, it is true, does not preclude knowledge or wisdom. There is genius in the oral tradition of all nations and peoples. Yet, in the modern age, education is the most essential condition and powerful agent of progress. And literacy remains the most basic and fundamental of educational skills. It is the favoured vehicle of education – the means through which ideas, information, knowledge and wisdom are expressed and exchanged. Thus, in a larger sense, International Literacy Year is not only about education, but also about progress, development, equality and opportunity. And literacy, properly understood, is a skill not only for reading the word, but also for understanding the world and for playing one's part in transforming it into a more just, equitable and congenial place to live.

TABLE 1. Adult illiterates (age 15 and over) and illiteracy rates – years: 1990, 2000 – both sexes

	Adult illiterates (15+) in millions		Illiteracy rates %	
	1990	2000	1990	2000
World Total	**962.6**	**942.0**	**26.9**	**22.0**
Developing countries	**920.6**	**918.5**	**35.1**	**28.1**
of which:				
Sub-Saharan Africa	**138.8**	**146.8**	**52.7**	**40.3**
Arab States	**61.1**	**65.8**	**48.7**	**38.1**
Latin America and the Caribbean	**43.5**	**40.9**	**15.2**	**11.3**
Eastern Asia	**281.0**	**233.7**	**24.0**	**17.0**
Southern Asia	**397.3**	**437.0**	**53.8**	**45.9**
Developed countries	**42.0**	**23.5**	**4.4**	**2.3**

Notes: Preliminary results. Countries and territories with less than 300 000 inhabitants have not been taken into account. Some countries are classified at the same time as Sub-Saharan Africa and as Arab States.
Source: Unesco Office of Statistics.

For the industrialized world, the 1980s have been an era of general, if highly uneven, prosperity. Yet, for most of the developing world, the last decade has proved to be a period of economic crisis and contraction. Indeed, contrary to all expectations, during the last years of the decade the net capital flow has often been from the poor countries to the rich ones, from the 'have-nots' to the 'haves' of the world. Education has been especially hard hit. Nearly half of the developing countries have seen the goal of universal primary education slip further from their grasp, reversing the rapid progress achieved in the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, as we begin International Literacy Year, there are an estimated 963 million adult illiterates (Table 1), as well as more than 125 million children in developing countries, between the ages of 6 and 11 years, who are not enrolled in school and are hence at risk of becoming the adult illiterates of the twenty-first century. It is also essential to note that in all developing regions the education of women and girls lags behind that of men and boys – a very worrisome omen as the presence of an educated mother in a home is much the best guarantee that the children – boys and girls – will grow up literate. Equally serious, if more difficult to quantify, is the declining quality of education offered in many countries – a deterioration which is explained by poorly and sometimes irregularly paid teachers, deteriorating buildings and facilities, and a dramatic shortage of books and learning materials. The quality of education is particularly decisive in developing countries, where many children are the sons and daughters of illiterate parents. Under such circumstances, the home environment cannot compensate for the failure of the school. If the cycle of illiteracy is to be broken, the school has an

indispensable role to play. Hence, the situation is critical and the stakes are high. It is not the progress of education alone which is at stake, but the very progress of society itself. Societies in which mass illiteracy is rife are ill-prepared to meet the most elemental needs of their growing populations: food, shelter and clothing.

There are two essential conditions for restoring the progress of education in the developing countries. The first is reform and renovation of education systems. This is the vital task which governments alone can assure. Unesco stands ready to offer its technical support and assistance – and, indeed, is already doing so on a considerable scale – but the primary responsibility – the initiative to act and the political will to persevere – can only be provided by national authorities. But in many countries, and particularly in the least developed countries, meaningful and rapid progress cannot be achieved by more effective use of internal resources alone. Indeed, in many of these countries, while per student expenditures are low and inadequate, the percentage of national product devoted to education considerably exceeds that in the industrialized countries and, in very difficult circumstances, resources are being used prudently and effectively. The root problem, however, remains the poverty and underdevelopment of the countries most affected by mass illiteracy.

This brings us to the second message of International Literacy Year, the imperative need for enhanced solidarity between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' of the world. But what is necessary is not simply to reverse the present pernicious trends in the flow of resources – indispensable as this is – but to build a new basis for long-term co-operation aimed at meeting the essential needs of all peoples and addressing the imbalances and crises confronting our increasingly interdependent world. Promoting education in developing countries – that is, increasing the capacity and self-reliance of these

societies – is not in their interest alone. It is an essential condition for coping successfully with global problems of vital concern to all nations and peoples.

LITERACY: THE ABSOLUTE PRIORITY OF UNESCO

In preparing the programme for the period 1990–1995, the representatives of the Member States requested me to accord 'absolute priority' to literacy. I fully and enthusiastically concur with this emphasis and have sought, and will continue to seek, every opportunity to strengthen Unesco's means for supporting its Member States in carrying out literacy activities. The strategy of Unesco in the struggle against illiteracy is outlined in a ten-year Plan of Action which was approved by the General Conference in the autumn of 1989. As this Plan makes clear, International Literacy Year is not planned as an isolated event, but as a mobilization for launching a decade-long programme of action. The Year, Unesco has insisted, must be a summons to action, not a celebration; a means, not an end; a starting point, not a conclusion. The specific purposes of ILY are to alert world public opinion to the extent and implications of illiteracy and to mobilize governments, United Nations agencies, voluntary organizations, the media and indeed all of us, for we are all concerned, to promote literacy.

The underlying purposes of the Plan of Action are to change societal and governmental priorities to give more emphasis, importance and resources to education and to promote a spirit of solidarity and co-operation among nations in the struggle to create a literate world. The measure of such solidarity is the concrete

international support provided for education in developing countries and, in particular, the least developed countries. The means for translating intentions into action are already in place in all the major developing areas, in the form of the regional programmes for elimination of illiteracy which, for more than a decade, Unesco has worked with its Member States to create in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, Asia and the Pacific and in the Arab States. These programmes operate on the principle of co-operation, exchange and mutual consultation among countries of a region. While each programme has its own unique characteristics, all programmes incorporate a global approach to combating illiteracy in which the reform and universalization of primary education is combined with the promotion of out-of-school programmes for youth and adults. A regional approach provides the needed scale of action while, at the same time, permitting exchanges among countries having roughly similar circumstances and enjoying close relations of co-operation. There is also, I should add, a network for exchanging information and experiences among industrialized countries on illiteracy and functional illiteracy based at the Unesco Institute for Education in Hamburg, Federal Republic of Germany.

As for international solidarity, which is both an ethical imperative and a development necessity, I am extremely hopeful that the World Conference on Education for All, which will take place in Thailand in March 1990, and, more particularly, the follow-up to this Conference, will open a new chapter in North-South co-operation in the field of education. The Executive Director of UNICEF, the Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme and the President of The World Bank joined with Unesco in sponsoring this Conference not only for widening the circle of UN partners concerned with education and literacy, but to express our firm conviction that illiteracy is not

only an educational problem, but a societal problem. The implication of this is that illiteracy cannot be overcome by educational action alone. If they are to succeed, educators must have the active support of all the forces of society. The struggle for literacy is bound up with the quest for justice, development and opportunity. ILY and the World Conference, which is one of the major events of the Year, are intended to build an expanding partnership dedicated to the promotion of literacy and education. The establishment of such a partnership is an essential condition for carrying out Unesco's Plan of Action – based upon according increased priority to education and building solidarity among States and peoples – and ensuring the success of literacy efforts around the world.

To follow up the recommendations of the World Conference, the forty-second session of the International Conference on Education, which will take place in Geneva in September 1990, as another highlight of ILY, will also be devoted to literacy and, more particularly, to ways and means of planning and implementing strategies for achieving education for all.

LITERACY LESSONS

I would be amiss if I did not take this opportunity to thank warmly the authors who have generously provided manuscripts for this series, *Literacy lessons*, as their personal contributions to International Literacy Year. Their contributions are highly appreciated. The purpose of *Literacy lessons* is to prompt reflection and permit an exchange of experience and ideas on literacy issues. The manuscripts, prepared by eminent authors, cover a broad range of topics, subjects and countries. Certain

'lessons' are based upon different national or regional experiences; others seek to explore policy alternatives; still others are accounts of various aspects of theory or practice or, in certain cases, of personal experiences in literacy teaching or learning. Together, these forty publications constitute a precious source of information and insights. I sincerely congratulate the International Bureau of Education on its fruitful initiative in launching this series as part of the IBE's contribution to ILY.

CONCLUSION

And so we begin 1990 with the hope and conviction that International Literacy Year can make a difference. Nobody imagines, of course, that ILY will suffice to solve the immense problem of illiteracy. It is quite impossible that a situation which is the consequence of deeply-rooted historical conditions can be put right in 365 days. Yet, we will never succeed unless we find the courage and vision to begin, to commit ourselves in order to convince others. The omens are favourable; the timing is right. With the easing of East-West tensions, there is a growing awareness that the progress of humanity depends upon enhanced co-operation and solidarity between North and South. And education, the force of the future, is the place to invest if the purpose of solidarity is, as it must be, to develop independent and self-reliant partners. Hence, we are presented with a unique opportunity: a chance we must not miss, a challenge we must not fail to meet.

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ILY: An opportunity we must not miss,
a challenge we must not fail to meet.

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